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Shelter In Place

Ric Sheffield
sheffier@kenyon.edu

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Shelter in Place

Is “social distancing” a noun or some sort of lazy verb, and what exactly does it mean for those of us living in rural America? I’m not particularly fond of the expression. Its connotations are unnerving to me. Though some of us live acres apart, the notion of intentionally avoiding one’s neighbors is antithetical to our sense of community. Discouraging us from pausing to engage in casual conversations at the market or to exchange pleasantries at the window with the folks at the village post office (a generations-old custom in a region with no home mail delivery) seems especially cruel. I’m still not used to seeing how the once warm hellos have given way to quick dashes to the rows of communal mailboxes avoiding not just speaking at length but even making eye contact out of a sense of guilt for what under normal circumstances would be seen as rude. I almost feel obliged to apologize for intentionally trying hard not to breathe in the same air space or touching the door handles that they have just touched. Was it really worth collecting the undeterred junk mail ironically announcing the impending Black Friday Sale? This feels like small town friendliness under assault, especially in a place where we’ve always been able to remain socially connected even when physically apart.

The experts – as if anyone is truly an expert about something that neither they nor anyone else currently living has experienced – give us hints about how to weather the viral storm (no pun intended, I think). It reminds me of how inadequate words become when trying to describe the indescribable, words like “strange,” “weird,” “crazy,” and “unprecedented” don’t quite capture the essence of the “never before” that we are experiencing. I did my part, though, getting much needed exercise walking my dog. During our 7am stroll, that I no longer take an hour earlier since there is nowhere that I have to be in the mornings, I am accustomed to walking in silence except for Quincy’s nails clicking on the sidewalk pavement. But the silence experienced where entire communities have been told to stay at home differs from the customary country quiet. It’s as if even the birds have gotten wind of the crisis and can’t quite muster their usual enthusiasm about the unfolding new day.

Standing under their usual roosting place high upon the water tower, I see a small group of turkey vultures assembled around the lone vehicle parked at the village bed and breakfast. As we moved slowly past the committee of vultures standing eerily still, I noticed that one is perched on the hood of a silver Toyota Yaris, staring deep into the windshield as if looking for some sign of life, although under normal circumstances it would be looking for some evidence of death or near-death. Had we encountered crows instead, the answer would have been more apparent. Life in this village as we have known it, if not already dead, is clinging to life support, and the murderer has gone unseen. Perhaps the Dead End sign just a block up the street wasn’t a coincidence, less intended now to be an assistance to the infrequent but unsuspecting drivers than a Hitchcockian warning to the community at large. I wondered if it might not have been more accurately read as Cliff Ahead.

As we walked further along Woodside Drive, the faint noise of amplified conversation spills from the house of the local professor of Italian. These are the only words spoken during our walk, a disembodied voice mediated by electrical impulses and unrecognizable as human even

by Q's ultra-sensitive hearing. Noises rising out of a single dimly lit room in the front of her house, I imagined that she was honing her online teaching skills or speaking with students or perhaps colleagues back in Italy where the devastation from the virus had been the most severe in the Western world.

The gentle vibration on my wrist encouraged me to walk faster and reminded me of the tennis engagement that would not happen today, or any day indoors for some time to come. The form of exercise that I relish most will have to wait until warmer weather, forecast likely to come much sooner than will the departure of this virus. A half dozen joggers approached me. While I smiled my approval from the other side of the street, I couldn't help but wonder if the health benefits of their run was being undone by the risks associated with their lockstep strides shoulder to shoulder. A short while later, a lone runner approached and I instinctively called out "good morning," partly because it'd been a few days since I had done that and partly because I unexpectedly found myself sort of happy to be in the safely-distanced company of another human being. I suspect it was also an acknowledgement that he was doing it the right way by staying at a safe distance from the others.

Dog walking is a good time to let one's mind roam. It isn't terribly demanding except the mindfulness of keeping him from leaving unwanted deposits on the lawns of the neighbors. Then, there's the occasional deer that cross our path, reminding us that not all wildlife is suspending their lives. Increasingly, they refuse to adhere to the advice about remaining six feet away. Perhaps they are lonely for human companionship as well. My customary vigilance with regard to approaching cars is pretty much gone; vehicles are even more rare in this remote village than is customary. I have finally stopped wearing the dorky-looking bright orange hunter's cap that I'm certain has saved me from becoming road-kill had I not steadfastly insisted upon wearing it. It's funny how the ubiquitous signs for now-vacant college buildings that before had gone largely unnoticed take on new meaning to me, reminders of the people and activities that would gone on within the walls. I walked by the same houses that I've always passed but now more aware that only a couple of them have children inside, a reminder that my neighborhood has grown old. Many of us are solidly in the high-risk group because of age or especially vulnerable as a consequence of histories of healthcare concerns. All of the sudden, I want to walk up to their front doors, ring the bells, and ask if they are doing ok. This must be an especially hard time to live alone. While a virus weakens the body, loneliness injures the soul.

They say that crises reveal one's weaknesses. While I prefer not to think of myself as a fearful person, my dreams of late belie my calm exterior. They've been vivid and exhausting. I wake up feeling alarmed even if I'm not sure why. I'm not afraid for myself; my own death is not on the list of things over which I have ever lost sleep. I do, though, worry about others for whom I care greatly and, perhaps, even those I know less well. Like when my casual email salutation yesterday was followed by perfunctory well wishes to my colleague, and she replied matter-of-factly that she is doing a decent job teaching her three classes remotely while dealing with the additional burden of having contracted the virus.

I can't help but think about the impact that this pandemic will have upon my family. The lives of my adult children huddled in their homes within the densely populated cities on the west coast. The lives of my siblings and their families isolating themselves within the confines of Midwestern suburbs. And, realizing that we are the lucky ones not experiencing apocalyptic shortages of food, water, and power. Still, an unshakeable sadness fills me these days. I think I know what it is. I miss her. I miss seeing my 92-year old mother, a resident in one of the area facilities where family members have been told to stay away for fear of infecting these most vulnerable elderly. I wonder if she realizes that I haven't been visiting or remembers when I last did. Now more than ever, I wish that her dementia had not stolen away her ability to speak or carry on a phone conversation. It would be nice to be able to check in to see how she is holding up with no contact from her loved ones. To tell her that I love her and miss her. Hoping that I will have the chance to tell her in person, even if for the last time.

While wishing for civility, I worry about those among us who lack the willingness and resolve, if not the capacity, to be empathetic and compassionate. Those who should be embarrassed if not ashamed that they are fretting about trivial inconveniences or annoyances when others have much more at stake. I am concerned for my Asian neighbors who have already suffered a backlash due to wrongly placed blame and confusion. Like the rest of us whose lives have been upset, they also have to deal with racist and xenophobic recriminations. As many residents of communities across this nation hurry past the Chinese restaurants that once sustained them and were long among their favorite haunts, these upright citizens somehow haven't lost their taste for pizza. And when my Asian friends enter the grocery stores, the so-called "regular Americans" vacate the aisles, rushing home to order their take-out Donatos in the big red and white cardboard boxes that ultimately will sit in a prominent place on their freshly disinfected kitchen counters.

And, I still reject the notion that this virus is an equal-opportunity killer. Yes, the privileged and powerful have quickly learned that they are not immune; yet, it is the poorest among us who remain the most at risk. What a privilege it is to be well enough to complain about the inconvenience. And not to be in the throes of a personal catastrophic illness while facing the broader health concerns brought on by the pandemic. How fortunate I am to be able to choose what I have a taste to eat for dinner tonight, not whether I will be able to find food to feed my family. I'm one of the lucky ones who can shelter in place because...well, I have a shelter, a place where I can be warm, feel reasonably safe, and have hope that we will survive to tell the story to our grandchildren.